



Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Opening Convocation
William & Mary
Wren Yard
Williamsburg, Virginia
August 29, 2018

President Rowe, Provost Halleran, members of the Board of Visitors, faculty and staff, and—most importantly—members of the freshman class, transfer students, and first-year graduate students: I’m Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy, and I’m so happy and honored to be here.

Welcome to Williamsburg. Welcome to your new home and to your new tribe.

Let me start by saying that I know how hard you worked to get here.

You spent long hours studying, reading, and learning—all while resisting the temptation of your smartphones and the apps lurking inside them.

You also devoted time and energy to your passions outside the classroom, whether it was athletics, the arts, debate, or some activity involving computers that your parents either brag or complain to their friends about, but don’t understand in the slightest.

Many of you have already fought for causes greater than yourself, and on behalf of people less fortunate than yourself—striving to better your community, your country, and your planet through acts of service.

You have taken many different paths, but they have all led here, converging in this magnificent place.

So, congratulations on reaching this milestone. It wasn’t easy. You had to *earn* it. I know you’ve made the people who love you incredibly proud. I’m sure they’re at home right now, missing the heck out of you—but probably also making plans to convert your old bedroom into a new entertainment center.

As you will hear many times, you have stepped foot on a campus that is steeped in history and tradition, one that traces its lineage back to when America was not yet a country, but a collection of colonies.

This university educated many of the men who helped build our nation—and, at that point, only men were fortunate enough to attend William & Mary. It taught some of the founding fathers who declared our independence; who led the revolution to win that independence; who crafted our Constitution and our Bill of Rights; and who established the democratic institutions that have endured over time.

Of course, the history of William & Mary, like the broader history of this Commonwealth and this country, is no fairytale. Instead, it is a complex and very human story. Our national narrative contains chapters marked by great achievements, but also chapters marked by serious shortcomings. In the chronicle of our country, acts of justice, inclusion, and moral courage are ever-present. But instances of injustice have been evident as well.

Round after round, hope and fear have traded punches like two powerful boxers. Hope has been knocked down on occasion, but it has never been knocked out.

In a real sense, the *story* of America is the struggle for the *soul* of America. And one constant theme in this struggle has been the effort to realize the promise at the heart of the Declaration of Independence . . . the fight to ensure that Jefferson’s immortal phrase—that all men are created equal—truly means *all* men, including people of color, and that it means all *women* too.

That’s why I’m especially grateful to be with you as we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the admission of women to William & Mary. It is powerful and fitting that President Katherine Rowe is presiding over tonight’s Convocation.

And so I stand here, the first Vietnamese-American woman elected to Congress, sharing a stage with the first woman chosen to lead this great university. I look out at all of you, a sea of faces composed of young men and women of every race and creed. I feel motivated by our past, inspired by our progress, and hopeful for our future. Above all, I feel pride and joy.

As William & Mary’s newest students, you are about to embark on your next journey, and it is a privilege for me to offer you a few words of advice as you set off.

But before I do that, like any self-respecting politician, I want to talk about myself first. Unlike the typical politician, however, I promise to keep it brief—disciplined by the fact that I cannot recall the name of my own convocation speaker. I just remember the heat and the hard chairs.

I refuse to believe it’s been this long, but—sadly—22 years ago, in the summer of 1996, I sat right where you are sitting now. I was a 17-year-old freshman. I was doing my best to appear calm and composed. But inside, I was *freaking out*.

The story of how I arrived in Williamsburg is worth sharing, because—although the stories of William & Mary alumni like Washington, Jefferson, Monroe and Marshall are more iconic—my story is also a very American story.

I was born in Vietnam in 1978. The Vietnam War had ended several years earlier. A communist government had taken power, and it was determined to punish those who had worked alongside American or South Vietnamese forces during the war. Both of my parents fell into that category.

When I was a baby, and my brother was eight, my dad and mom concluded that a difficult situation had become intolerable. They wanted us to live in a place where we would be safe, where we would have freedom and dignity, and where we would have the opportunity for a better life—and they didn't think any of that was possible in Vietnam.

So we fled Vietnam in a small boat in the dead of night. By attempting to escape, my parents took the risk that we might not survive the passage. But they had decided that it was better for our family to die together in search of light than to live in darkness.

Several days into our journey, our boat ran out of fuel in the middle of the South China Sea. We sent out an emergency call and began to drift. I imagine the adults on the boat must have thought the end was near.

Fate, however, had a different plan for us. Thanks to grace or good fortune, a U.S. Navy ship patrolling in the area received our distress signal and located our boat. The sailors onboard, all of them trained for combat, showed compassion for desperate strangers. They gave us the fuel and supplies we needed to reach a Malaysian refugee camp.

This was the moment that made the rest of my life possible. Although I was too young to realize it, this was also my first lesson in America's uniquely wonderful combination of power and generosity. It's a lesson I've re-learned many times since then, and one that is now eternally etched into my heart.

After spending several months at the Malaysian refugee camp, my family once again became the beneficiary of American courage and kindness. President Jimmy Carter, in the face of significant public skepticism, made the brave decision to increase the number of refugees from Southeast Asia that the United States would accept. This policy change set the stage for the big-hearted members of a Lutheran Church in Virginia to sponsor my family's passage to the U.S. We settled in Fredericksburg and soon became proud American citizens.

In the course of the physical journey from Vietnam to America, and the emotional journey from darkness to light, my family accrued a debt of gratitude to this country that, try as I might, I can never fully repay.

Although we were beyond grateful to be living in the United States, our life here was far from easy. My dad used to say that he arrived in America with nothing but his two bare hands. My parents were very poor, and very proud. They did everything they could to make ends meet and to provide a better life for my brother and me.

Like many refugees who escaped danger and disorder in their native land, my parents sought security and stability for their children in their adopted country. They were deeply loving, but understandably strict and cautious. I had my moments of adolescent rebellion, but in retrospect they were pretty tame, maybe even a little lame.

So, when I arrived at William & Mary, and sat where you're sitting now, I felt overwhelmed. I had known adversity, I had studied and worked hard, but my life experience was limited. I had no idea what to expect here, and no idea whether I was ready.

The reason I will always love and treasure this place is that, contrary to my worst fears, I was warmly welcomed into this close-knit community and into this loyal, loving tribe. My American story merged into the larger American story that William & Mary embodies.

It was here in Williamsburg—a place so central to the American experiment—that this abstract idea called the American Dream began to assume real meaning for me.

I experienced firsthand that, with hard work, a healthy dose of humility, and a helping hand from others, you can change your life for the better within the span of a single generation. Regardless of how modest your upbringing, regardless of where your parents were born, regardless of your race or gender, regardless of all those factors completely beyond your control—you can overcome the odds and achieve your personal and professional dreams.

That is the promise of America, and it is a promise that this university helped fulfill in my own life. William & Mary prepared me to confront any challenge. It gave me the confidence I previously lacked. It made me feel like I *belonged*, in every sense of the word.

My four years on campus—from the moment I walked through Wren Portico as a freshman to the moment I rang the Wren bell as a senior—were transformational. I learned so much from my professors and my peers. I made great friendships, some of which have lasted until this very day.

And I had a ton of fun—all of it, I can assure you, in strict accordance with both Virginia and federal law. There were tough times, of course, but I grew as much from them as I did from the good times.

As we go through life, we accumulate labels—words that can be used as shorthand to describe who we are and what matters to us. Some of these labels make us happy; others make us cringe. In my case, one of the labels that makes me the proudest—alongside mother, and wife, and public servant—is William & Mary graduate.

That's why I am so excited for you to begin your own journey through this place, and so let me close with that advice I promised you.

I suggested at the outset that the story of America is the struggle for the soul of America.

It will not surprise you to learn that I believe we have reached one of those pivotal moments in our nation's history where this struggle—this battle between hope and fear—has become very intense and the stakes have become very high.

Lately, it sometimes feels like the union that William & Mary graduates fought so hard to create, and have since fought so hard to perfect, is fraying at the seams. Too often recently, it can feel like the bonds of mutual loyalty that hold Americans together are starting to splinter.

If you've studied American history, and read about chapters like the Civil War or the civil rights movement, you'll recognize that moments of deep division, discord and darkness in our country are not unprecedented. But they should still be *unacceptable* to every American patriot.

I can tell you: As someone who owes her life to this nation, and who has never lost sight of its greatness, I refuse to accept this as the new normal.

Right now, you may be saying to yourself: "Nice speech, Congresswoman Murphy—but what does all this have to do with me? I'm a first-year student. I'm just trying to choose my classes and make some friends so I don't have to sit by myself in the dining hall."

It's a fair point, but hear me out.

As I see it, what this country needs right now—what it requires if hope is going to prevail over fear in this latest round—is good citizens.

Make no mistake: our democracy is not self-sustaining. To survive, and to thrive, it needs kind, smart, and engaged citizens.

In other words, it needs *you*.

You cannot fix America's problems or heal America's divisions on your own. But you *can* do your part—and William & Mary can help you do it.

That's because a great university is a training ground for a good citizen. You just need to take advantage of all this place has to offer.

Let me be clear: I don't care where you fall on the political spectrum. As someone who takes pride in being bipartisan, and who is viewed with skepticism by folks on both the far right and the far left, I don't believe either party has a monopoly on good ideas or bad behavior.

Whatever your political views may be at this stage in your life, my gentle advice to you is the same:

Read, listen, and learn. Read as much as you can. Listen to experts, so you can distinguish them from the imposters. Learn from your brilliant professors and your talented classmates. Whatever your major, try to study some American history, constitutional law, and other topics relevant to the national debate. Absorb those principles, values and ideals that have made our country

exceptional. Because if you can't recognize them, then you won't realize when they are being tarnished or threatened.

Don't compromise on your core beliefs. But be open-minded, and be open to changing your mind. Your opinions can and should evolve—just like our nation has evolved over its own history.

Make it a point to seek out those who look different from you, who come from different backgrounds than you, and who may think differently from you. These are often the most important interactions you will have and the most valuable relationships you will form. Push yourself to get outside your comfort zone, and try to see the world from another perspective. In the best cases, you will discover empathy and enlightenment.

Learn *how* to argue your point and *how* to persuade others. Contrary to what the cable news school of thought might lead you to believe, nobody has ever changed anyone else's mind by yelling at them, disrespecting them, or patronizing them. Stand up for your principles, but do so in a way that is dignified, respectful and civil. The person you are trying to convince may not treat you as well in return, but this is about you, not about them.

If you do all these things, you will leave William & Mary prepared to be the good citizen that this great country so desperately needs right now.

I wish you the best of luck on your journey through life. You've done an incredible job so far, and I know you'll keep making us proud.

Thank you.